

AI Index: PRE 01/201/2011
11 April 2011

Charges against Ugandan opposition leaders must be dropped

The Ugandan authorities must drop all criminal charges against several leading opposition figures temporarily detained today for taking part in protests in the capital Kampala, Amnesty International said today.

The opposition politicians, activists and their supporters were arrested during demonstrations calling for people to walk to work in protest at fuel price rises. Most of the politicians were later released on bail but still face criminal charges.

"The stifling of this protest and the force used against the protesters is an outrageous affront to freedom of expression, made possible by Uganda's unjust ban on public rallies," said Amnesty's researcher on Uganda, Dr. Godfrey Odongo.

"The Ugandan government must not use criminal charges against people engaged in peaceful protests, and all those still in custody must be released."

Among those arrested were Kizza Besigye, leader of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Democratic Party leader Norbert Mao and four newly elected opposition members of parliament affiliated to the FDC party.

After hours of detention, the leaders were released on bail and face a range of charges including 'inciting violence' and 'holding unlawful assemblies'.

Police used teargas to disperse the protesters, whom they said were throwing stones. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that demonstrators started throwing stones after the police moved to disrupt the initially peaceful protest.

Since the conclusion of the February 2011 general elections, the Ugandan police have maintained a blanket ban against all forms of public assemblies and demonstrations, on grounds of ensuring public security.

This ban typically affects public demonstrations and rallies that appear to express dissent against the electoral process and current government policies.

"The disruption of peaceful protests and demonstrations and the ban on public rallies violates the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly provided for under Uganda's Constitution and international law -including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - to which Uganda is party," said Godfrey Odongo.